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THE ASSAULT ON MODERNISM IN MUSIC

By R. D. WELCH

MODERNISM, new-born in every generation, utters its first cries in unwilling ears. Child of Tradition and Change, it is repudiated by both parents. Not as the legitimate heir of its cherished treasures does a generation greet its modernism, but as an ugly changeling whose features forebode neglect and destruction of all that one of its parents prizes. Yet, somehow, and in spite of neglect, this unwelcome infant comes to maturity; imperceptibly its words lose their harshness; its features soften and its acts prove it the legitimate heir of all its finest heritage. Such is the life-history of the New Idea of any generation.

The musician who stands on a vantage ground, mid-way as it were, between two generations, may review the whole process of birth, growth and acceptance of modernism. Time was (and not long since) when our ears were assailed by strange, new sounds from the piano and orchestra, evoked by one Claude Debussy. Contemporary criticism strengthened the belief of many of us that music had fallen upon evil times; that men had turned their backs on beauty; that melody had been deformed; and that harmony had become an instrument of torture. And then, after a few short years, Debussy becomes our familiar, fireside friend. He appears without apology on conservative concert programmes; his name becomes a symbol for the delicate and imaginative and suggestive in all modern art; he is given over to the tender mercies of the young person who practices the piano, and he attains the fame of mention in the Victor catalogue. But while this process has been going on, we have been confronted by new and more merciless modernists. Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Malipiero and the "enfant terrible" Korngold, now bear the brunt of our hostility. Yet, one may, if he read the future from the past, see for these writers an approaching fate not unlike that which has overtaken Debussy.

Our experience with Debussy—I use him as a symbol for many; substitute Richard Strauss and the argument remains the same—does not encourage us for the future. Nor does it

induce us to temper our assault on modernism. We are not content to say that we shall, in time, accustom ourselves to these strange sounds.

But it is not just to lay the blame for all our hostility at the door of prejudice and tradition. We feel—and the sentiment is genuine—that what is beautiful, and for which the greatest minds of our past have labored, has been set aside and neglected. I believe we are sincere, although we may be mistaken, in the feeling that our dislike of a new work is of far greater importance than our mere pleasure or displeasure. We feel, and I think it an admirable feeling, that our distaste is directed at a fundamental error, and that our protest may serve to rectify that error. We sincerely do wish to see the good in the new; we sincerely do feel that art is falling upon evil times; and more than this, we do try to believe that a vital, immutable truth, although it may appear in ugly strangeness, lives in and animates the art of our day, connecting it with the past, and assuring the health of its future.

Precisely that we may discern this eternal and unchanging principle in music, is it of value to analyze the assault on modernism, not only as it is delivered to-day, but as it has been launched in other generations? If we can detach these features of modernism which have invited attack, we shall then know whether or not the works which have survived the attack have been strong enough to do so because of those very features or for some other reason.

It makes no difference into which age we dip, we find that war is the natural state of man—critical war—and curiously enough we find, too, that the *casus belli* is much the same, and that the strategy of offence and defense differs very little.

* * *

Phrynis was a Greek. He lived in the fifth century before Christ and at a time when man had just found that music could be made by instruments—on the cythera and the aulos—without aid of the human voice. Men had learned it, but by painful steps; and not all men were willing to admit it as a truth. But Phrynis and his fellows, Timotheus and Melanippides, pleased their public with this music and while they pleased their public, at the same time, they brought against themselves the charge of having corrupted the art. Phrynis was reproached “for striving after unexpected effects, striking contrasts, and a taste for the difficult,” while his friend, Timotheus, was censured for transforming the

dithyramb, a hymn to Dionysius, into a show-piece destined to give glory to the talent of a virtuoso. The spectators who had heard a certain tragedy, written by Epigenes, are said to have cried out, "But what is there in this for Dionysius?" "What is there in this for Dionysius?" is the cry of all those who feel that art is being torn away from its exalted place and distracted from its high mission.

Palestrina, two thousand years after Phrynis, directed on his deathbed that the publication of his last manuscripts should be devoted "to the glory of the most high God and the worship of His holy temple," and at another time this same gentle Palestrina accused his contemporaries in these words,

the greater blame, therefore, do those deserve who employ so great and splendid a gift of God in light or unworthy things, and thereby excite men, who of themselves are inclined to all evil, to sin and misdoing.

In his own way, and in a new time, Palestrina was maintaining the standard of the Hellenistic audience: "What is there in this for Dionysius?" A little later, when music had come out of the cloister and the church, and had frankly given up its allegiance to the services of the "most high God," another aim of its being was sought in giving pleasure. With the beginning of opera, music turned to a new purpose and it was held accountable for its deeds in the light of that purpose—to give pleasure.

Monteverdi, who for dramatic reasons introduced dissonance into his scores, became the center of an attack by one Artusi, who in 1600 wrote his treatise concerning "The Imperfections of Modern Music." Signor Artusi, accused the modern composers of having "lost sight of the proper function of music, which is to give pleasure." Dionysius has been dethroned. We ask no longer "What is there in this for Dionysius?" but "What is there in this that gives us pleasure?" The intent is the same. Music in both cases is claimed to have lost sight of its purpose.

From Monteverdi to Bach is, after all, but a short step. Bach, too, was reproached for having forgotten the purpose of his art. He was a young man at the time, and his duties as organist at Arnstadt evidently left his imagination much time for experiment. There is, in an official record, a rebuke delivered in these terms:

He hath heretofore made sundry perplexing variations and imported divers strange harmonies of such wise that the congregation was thereby confounded,

and a witness added that

the organist Bach hath at the first played too tediously, howbeit, on notice received from the superintendent, he hath straightway fallen into the other extreme and made the music too short,

which goes to inform us that the future author of the St. Matthew Passion and the B Minor Mass at times found his parishioners a little tiresome, and that he had a sense of humor.

But the assault on the modern does not limit itself to the purposes that the modernists cultivate or fail to cultivate. Technical virtues or errors come in for a large share of the attack. Mozart's publishers, sending the scores of certain of his quartets back with a sarcastic comment regarding the "obvious misprints," pronounced a sentence on their own harmonic obtuseness. They were not the first, nor alas! the last, to find in every unfamiliar combination of sounds an object of contempt and scorn. Here is Rellstab, the once highly accredited critic of Berlin, anent certain minor works of Chopin:

Chopin is indefatigable, and I might say inexhaustible in his ear splitting discords, forced transitions, harsh melodies, ugly distortions of melody and rhythm. Everything it is possible to think of is raked up to produce the effect of originality but especially *strange keys* and the unnatural positions of chords.

The nowadays better known Ernest Newman puts himself on record, in his work on Richard Strauss, in this way:

Merely a piece of laborious stupidity; a blatant and hideous piece of work. There must be a flaw, one thinks, in the mind of a man who can deliberately spoil a great and beautiful, artistic conception by inserting such monstrosities as these in it.

Henry T. Finck likewise finds Strauss deserving the sharpest censure for the same reason—Henry T. Finck, who, be it remembered, writes with such heroic protest against all the critics of Richard Wagner because they used almost the same words as he used in his book on Richard Strauss:

There are too many dissonanted blotches in Strauss' pages. Not content, like Liszt and the other great masters with dissonances, he progresses to cacophonies for their own sake. Hideous daubs of sounds, they torture the ear like a concert of steamboat whistles on a foggy morning in the bay. To these cacophonies, even the admirers of Strauss feel like saying, "Out, damned spot."

The assault in all of these latter instances is being delivered not at the failure to maintain a high purpose, but at the use or misuse of tools. It is beyond the purpose of this article to consider whether or not in any of these cases the critics were justified in

their feeling that harmony was misused, but it may be observed that the disharmony of one generation commonly becomes the current usage of the next, and there is a sense in which the whole history of music may be said to be the history of the acceptance of discord.

Our critics direct their attention to melody as well as harmony. There is one instance of such criticism that might, on account of its authorship, have weight for the unwary. Here is what Ruskin found in the *Meistersinger*:

Of all the bête, clumsy, blundering, boggling, baboon-headed stuff I ever saw on a human stage, that thing last night, as far as the story and acting went, and of all the affected, sapless, soulless, beginningless, endless, topless, bottomless, topsituvliest, tuneless, scrannelpipiest, tongs and boniest doggerel of sounds I ever endured, the deadliness of that eternity of nothing was the deadliest as far as its sound went. I was never so relieved, so far as I can remember, in my life by the stopping of any sound not excepting railroad whistles, as I was by the cessation of the cobbler's bellowing, even the serenader's caricatured twangle was a rest after. As for the great lied, I never made out where it began or where it ended except by the fellow's coming off the horse block.

Evidently Mr. Ruskin had a bad evening! To be sure Ruskin has been proved mistaken in his judgment of other arts than music, but what he says here was asserted also by eminent musicians among his contemporaries. And then there is Romain Rolland, who "could not find a single melody truly original or interesting in itself in Strauss' works." Rolland, too, brings up the question of purpose again when he summarizes the whole work of Strauss:

And this is how the work of Richard Strauss appears to me up to the present. Guntram kills Duke Robert, and immediately lets fall his sword. The frenzied laugh of Zarathustra ends in an avowal of discouraged impotence. The delirious passion of Don Juan dies away in nothingness; Don Quixote, when dying, foreswears his illusions. Even the Hero (*Das Heldenleben*), admits the futility of his work and seeks oblivion in an indifferent Nature. We get all this display of super-human will, and the end is only 'My desire is gone.' It was not thus that Beethoven overcame his sorrows. Sad adagios make their lament in the middle of his symphonies, but a note of joy and triumph is always sounded at the end. His work is the triumph of a conquered hero; that of Strauss is the defeat of a conquering hero.

Rhythm, also, that more subtle and easily confused element in the whole musical mixture, receives with harmony and melody, its share of the attack on modernism. From the multitude of examples that might be quoted I choose a criticism of Debussy's

Peléas et Mélisande written by Henry Edward Krehbiel in his "Chapters of Opera."

A flocculent hazy web of dissonant sounds, now acrid, now bitter-sweet, maundering along from scene to scene, unrelieved by a single melodic phrase.

Still, Mr. Krehbiel is inclined to a grudging realization that others may not agree with him. He continues:

No one should be ashamed to proclaim his pleasure in four hours of uninterrupted, musically inflected speech, over a substratum of shifting harmonies, each with its individual tang and instrumental color. Neither should anyone be ashamed to say that nine-tenths of the music is a dreary monotony because of the absence of what stands to him as musical thought.

There is an unusual critical generosity about all this: it isn't common for a critic to admit that those who disagree with him have a perfect right to do so.

And, finally, form is likewise the object of attack. But I shall not labor the case.

The instances might be multiplied almost without number, all pointing to the same conclusion; namely, that the attack on modernism is directed at an alleged failure to maintain the high purpose of art, and at an ugliness and a strangeness which has come about through the use of new harmonies, unfamiliar melodies, obscure rhythms and unconventional forms. As one reads a large part of modern criticism, one feels that their writers could not hear the music for the notes. In many respects they recall the ancient fable of the three blind men who went out to acquaint themselves with the elephant. One of these blind men, on approaching the elephant, got hold of his tail; a second seized the beast by the leg; and the third explored its ear. When they returned and compared accounts, they fell into a desperate wrangle because one declared the elephant to be very like a rope, and the second was equally sure that an elephant was like a tree, while the third maintained stoutly that an elephant resembled a fan. Each was right and each was wrong. In one instance we find the modern critic has seized music by its harmonies, and he reports that the new work is like nothing so much as "a concert of steamboat whistles;" the second has turned his attention to melody, and he declares that modern music is either deficient in this desirable element or else that such melody as is to be found gives evidence of a disjointed and irrational mind; and lastly, our third critic

picks up the rhythm and assures us that we have nothing but amorphous meanderings "without form and void."

Now the interesting fact with regard to all of the quotations that I have cited (and a very large number of others that I have omitted), is that there is a measure of truth in each of them. Indeed, as each of these criticisms was written, it seemed without doubt wholly true to its writer. It must be admitted that there was "nothing for Dionysius" in that lyrical tragedy of Epigines. Wagner's harmonies *did* and some of Strauss' *do* hurt the ear. Schoenberg quite frankly sets about to avoid what is commonly known as rhythm, and as for melody, if it is to be found in certain modern works we shall have to revise the meaning of the word melody. Yet many of the works which we have seen so censured are masterpieces! Are they such in spite of their faults? A thousand times, no; rather because of them, or rather because of what was commonly reckoned faults by contemporary critics. But leaving aside the question as to whether or not the works which have born the brunt of the assault on modernism have survived in spite of or because of their faults, it is clear that the reason for the greatness of these works must be sought elsewhere than in those details which seize the critics' mind. It will not suffice to say simply that the critics were wrong. It will be more true, perhaps, to say that they were partial, biased, or of small vision. The fact remains that these works, however they may have appeared to their contemporaries, embodied a living spirit that pervades the art of tone; a spirit that does not destroy, but fulfils the law.

Can we find that spirit? Can we isolate it from the accidents of harmony and melody and rhythm, or from the purpose to which a given work is directed, whether that purpose be something "for Dionysius," "to the glory of the most high God" or "to give pleasure?" If we pursue such a search, are we likely to find ourselves in the position of those anatomists who, having dissected away all the limbs and organs of the body in their search for the vital spark, find that they have only dead debris? The obvious insufficiency of the criticism that attaches itself only to harmonies and rhythms and purposes, leaves us so unsatisfied that the search for some deeper truth presents itself almost as an obligation. We cannot escape it unless we are content to be partial and superficial in our judgment. If at the end of our search we find we have nothing, that there is no informing life in a work of music transcending the accidents of form and structure, we shall at least be on solid ground, though that ground be "of the earth, earthy."

There have been many who have attempted this search, and they have left us an illuminating record. In a word, they posed the question, "What is music about; in what consists its beauty, and what human purpose does it serve?" Here are some of the answers:

"Music is the art of combining sounds in a manner agreeable to the ear." Thus concludes J. J. Rousseau. It is the same doctrine that Artusi hurled at Monteverdi when he reminded him that the purpose of music was to give pleasure, and it is a doctrine by no means out of vogue to-day. It has fallen, to be sure, into discredit since it has been overworked by that type of critic or semi-critic who does not know anything about music, but knows what he likes. It has long been a favorite sport of the newer generation of intellectuals to show up the absurdities of the conclusions of the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century had no automobiles and no electric lights; no sewing machines and no victrolas. What could it know of life? By the same token the eighteenth century did not have a Beethoven or a Wagner or a Strauss. Its musical conclusions must consequently be wholly fallacious. Yet in all seriousness, even if Rousseau's doctrines were strictly correct, we should never have witnessed the phenomenon of works seeming at first appearance very unpleasing to the ear, and upon better acquaintance revealing great beauties. Moreover, if to please the ear were the sole end of music, what becomes of the other values we instinctively and unconsciously read into fine compositions, such as seriousness or gaiety or vigor or pathos? The fifth symphony of Beethoven pleases the ear and at the same time it satisfies the mind with a complete presentation of an idea, however intangible the idea and difficult to put it into words. The same may be said for the symphony by César Franck, but how different the ideas that we impute to the two works.

"Music is a combination of arabesques in sound." It was Hanslick, in 1854, who came to this conclusion in his treatise on "The Beautiful in Music," after rejecting Rousseau's doctrine and also combating the idea that music is the language of emotions. For Hanslick, music need not please the ear, and for him it certainly was not a means of expressing an emotion. For his clearing up of the emotional quagmire into which music seems to fall in the minds of a large number of writers, we are the eternal debtors of Hanslick. He pins us down to a precise confession of faith. "Is the adagio of such and such a sonata, a love story or a meditation or despondency or what you will?" and we retire in confusion. Emotion plays a large part in any work, but music goes at it so

vaguely—"all things to all men"—that we are forced to the conclusion that if music occupies itself with nothing but the expression of emotion it does its job very badly. Furthermore, this continual picking and probing at emotion, is just a little tiresome. No emotion pure and unadorned ever produced a work of art, or even a rational human utterance. And yet Hanslick's theory that music is arabesque, leaves us quite cold. Arabesque is, after all, a pretty, but unessential adornment. Has the human race devoted so much of its time and attention to an unessential and decorative ornament when it has cultivated music? Is the weaving of pretty patterns the aim and end of music?

Better than either of these theories of music, or better than any of the many others that might be quoted, seems to me this one formulated by Jules Combarieu: "Music is the art of thought in tone." I have no doubt that this definition is found by many to be full of flaws, and that though it may receive general recognition now, will be found by subsequent generations to be as inadequate as those that our forefathers have set before us. Nevertheless, the more one considers that simple sentence, the more comprehensive does it seem of all those elements: purpose, rhythm, melody, harmony, style—what you will—that enter into the making of a musical composition. Its first four words, "Music is the art" define for us immediately the category of human activity in which music is placed. As an art it must take due account of unity and variety, symmetry and balance, and other inescapable conditions of *artistic* expression. The artist takes colors, forms, light, marble, and combines them with his own inner conceptions; he *thinks* with and in them. Just so the musician takes tone, not tone as it exists in nature, but tone as man has refined it. Only rarely does a sound occur in nature that we may call a *tone*.

Sentimentalists are rapturous over the Music of Nature. The expression contains a contradiction of terms. Bird songs come as near to tone, as opposed to noise, as one will find it in nature, but bird songs are not art, for art is a conscious human product: it is the embodiment of man's will in the search for beauty. Man takes tone as he takes marble, and he does something with it. In other words, *he thinks in tone*. He makes it express his thought. "Music is the art of thought in tone," or stated in another way, *thought, using tone as its medium, creates an art-work*. It builds structures that eye hath not seen and it weaves indeed—at times—arabesques. Thought in tone reveals the grandeur or the smugness, the loftiness or the meanness of the human mind—*thought in tone, with no responsibility to anything but thought*. No purpose

enters in except that the thought express itself. Whatever tools, harmonic or melodic, are needed that the thought may express itself, these tools must be employed. And that of artistic necessity, though they may shock tradition and hurt the ear.

We found out, not many yesterdays ago, that modern painters (let us take no more modern a group than the post-impressionists) strove for a beauty not of accidents or externals, but one that was fundamental and eternal. The light that played upon the surface of things, the phenomena that so fascinated the impressionists, to the post-impressionists seemed trivialities of their art; true forms and the nature of things remained to be revealed. The modern musician is working in much the same spirit. He is not concerned with pleasing the ear; he is not concerned with niceties of traditional style, but I believe he is concerned with the fundamentals and the realities of thought as it is found in a complex, changing, strident, modern world. The one abiding fact that is true of all great works of music of any kind is this—that a man has tried to reveal what seemed true to him. Not the current sentiment; not a traditional style, not even that which men call beautiful, have of themselves been the goal for which the truly original creative mind has ever worked. *He has had allegiance to nothing except the integrity of his own mind.* There will always be minds so saturated, so engrossed with their own subjects that they will see purposes hidden to the many, and they will speak with a language, that, while it seems familiar, seems forbidding. So there will always be musicians who understand so much better the untouched possibilities of tone, and whose “thought in tone” is so much more advanced than that of their contemporaries that they will write music that is music of the future. But whether a musician uses harsh means or gentle, whether he be simple or obscure, there is only one question that matters: Has the mind used tone purposefully to the ends of *artistic creation*?

In the contemporary estimate of new and strange works it is generally at first the accidents, the harmony, the melody, the form that are hit upon, but when the attack launched against a great work aims at these accidentals, it glances, and in no way reaches the essentials.